Prairie Comment Program

From C.J.C.A. Edmonton to Western Network.

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"TALL TALES ARE HISTORY"

Script by Della Foss

OPENING ANNOUNCEMENT.

FOSS: A few weeks ago, I ran across this headline in the paper: "Professor Collects Alberta's Tall Tales". Well, I lived in Alberta a long time, but I honestly didn't realize that any of our 'Tall Tales' would be so important. Needless to say, I read the story. The professor was Robert E. Gard from the Cornell University, and, as the article explained, he was making a study of Alberta's folklore and local history. I couldn't help wondering what an American was doing up here collecting material about us. I thought it looked like a good story, so a few days later, I arranged to meet Mr. Gard He turned out to be a young man who is very friendly and co-operative... even to a point where he let me persuade him—to be interviewed today... about his work here in Alberta.

Mr. Gard, I imagine the first thing everyone wants to hear is how you happened to come to Alberta to do this work?

Gard: Well, I've been interested in Alberta ever since a year ago last summer when I was here giving some lectures on playwriting at the Banff School of Fine Arts.

Foss: Playwriting... Is that what you taught at Cornell University, too?

Gard: That's right.

Foss: And when did you start making plans to come back to Alberta--after that first visit to Banff, I mean...?

Gard: Right at the time. I talked over the possibilities of a folklore project with the Director of the Extension Department of the University of A lberta.

Foss: Oh, I see.

Gard: My plans materialized just this last summer... in L943. The Extension Department sponsored the scheme and the Rockefeller Foundation provided a grant to pay for the research.

Foss: Then you were all set.

Gard: Not quite. Not until my draft board decided the project was important enough that I was given leave of absence for a year.

Foss: I was about to say you lo k too young for a professor, but I didn't quite dare. ...Now...What are you using this material you collect for? A re you going to write a book?

Gard: Well, I'd like to later on. But our immediate purpose goes a little beyond that. We're working with the history department of the University of Alberta and with the other historians of the province.

Foss: Oh, then you're doing more than collecting 'ta ll tales'.

Gard: Yes, we're trying to lay the foundations for a provincia l archive before a lot of precious material is lost or forgotten.

Foss: I see ...but since you're a playwright, and author, I've an idea you're more interested in other angles of your work.

Gard: You're right. First and foremost, I'd like to have a record of Alberta 's past put into a permanent form so that the writers--a nd would-be writers-- of the province could draw on the material for stories and books and play and poetry.

FOSS: That sounds like a marvelous idea-- and a va luable one, too.

GARD: Well, it's almost exactly the same thing we were doing at Cornell University about New York State.

Foss: Is it really!

GARD: At Cornell, it was little different. We collected all the material there, just as we're doing here. Then about two hundred writers got busy dramatizing it.

FOSS: What did you do with the plays after they were written?

GARD: We made them available to any Little Theatre Group in the North-Eastern States royalty free.

FOSS: Do you t ink the same thing might be done in Alberta later on?

Gard: That's what I'd like to see happen. The material here is as good as anywhere— any maybe a little bet er than most places.

FOSS: We have so many national groups here in Alberta-- an idea like this ought to do a lot to make the people in one group understand those in another. Don't you think so?

GARD: That's our idea in a nutshell. ...Here in A lberta are settlements to Sudetens, Ukranians, Hutterites, Mennonites, Mormons ...as well as French, English, Irish and S otch ... and plain Canadian.

FOSS: And I imagine you've still forgotten a few.

GARD: I imagine I have. I know in one Alberta town there are seventeen different religions -- and seventeen is a pretty large number. ...Anyway, we figure all these people will understand and like each other better, if they know more about each other.

FOSS: I think you're right ... and understanding people better looks pretty important ... today in particular. ...By the wa y, Mr. Gard, I notice you've said "we" more than once. Is someone helping you with your work?

GARD: Only my wife, but I wouldn't like you to underestimate her help.

FOSS: That would never do. Besides, I don't see how anyone could when the two of you have undertaken such a large project.

GARD: It is large. We won't any more than get the ball rolling in a year . . . but we hope to arouse enough interest that someone else will carry on the work

FOSS: Now, I've been wondering... I meant to ask you before this... how do you go about collecting these facts and stories?

GARD: Well, I get most of them from the old-timers themselves.

FOSS: How do you manage that?

GARD: For one thing, I've been broadcasting almost every week. And I ask the old timers in the different parts to write in and tell me their stories.

FOSS: And do they?

GARD: You bet they do. I've heard from over two hundred communities now.

FOSS: Two hundred-- that's really a lot! What are some of the letters like? I imagine they must be good.

GARD: Oh, they're more than just 'good'. Some of them are so humorous, they have you chuckling out loud. I got one from Vulcan that started like this: Dear Mr. Gard "I guess I owe you a letter. I wish that was all I did owe. Now to get on with my stories-- There are some things you can't say about people who are still alive and of course that kind of cramps my style---"

FOSS: Yes--I think we've all found that out!

GARD: Here's another good one that came from Vulcan.

FOSS: Vulcan must have quite a few good stories to its credit.

GARD: Almost more than its share. ...This old timer starts his letter--"If I had a good stenographer or even a homely one and a couple of snorts of snake poison, perhaps I could write a letter every day. My

experiences are all pretty well halter-broke and tamed, but they're still hard to write about" (CHUCKLES) I think that's enough of that one.

FOSS: I suppose so — but I think we'd like to hear it all. ...You must get a lot of more serious letters, too, don't you?

GARD: Yes, they're mostly serious. Here's a bit from one I got from the Peace River Country— and it's fairly typical: "I see by the Press you want information about Alberta. I know something about Alberta and my region. Besides, I'm lonely as the devil, so come up and talk."

FOSS: That writer mentioned the "Press". Do you contact the old timers through the newspapers, too?

GARD: Yes, we do.

FOSS: And then you travel to these different parts, do you?

GARD: Yes.

FOSS: By car?

GARD: Yes, most of the time. I figure now I've visited almost everyplace there is in Alberta.

FOSS: I suppose I shouldn't bring up such a painful subject... but you don't do all this travelling around on an AA Book?

GARD: No— I'm one of the lucky people who has an A Book, too. That gives me plenty to carry on with.

FOSS: In that case, Mr. Gard, the government must consider your work essential.

GARD: Yes, I guess so... fortunately for me.

FOSS: I've been wondering... you must get yourself into the odd predicament while you're out gathering your material... do you know what I mean?

GARD: Well... I wouldn't exactly call them predicaments. But some funny

things do happen sometimes.

FOSS: Like what, for example?

GARD: Well, like the time I was invited to a tea in a little town not far from here. I was told I was going to get a lot of material.

FOSS: And didn't you?

GARD: All I got was a cup of tea. There were twelve old ladies there—— the youngest was seventy and the oldest was ninety-six. I think they were all deaf. Anyway, they all yelled at each other, and contradicted each other—— I never heard anything like it in my life!

FOSS: It must have been a queer experience, just the same!

GARD: Oh, yes, it was that! ——Another time, I visited a town and asked an old timer there if they had any good stories for me. And he told me there best one had just 'died'.

FOSS: Did you say 'died'?

GARD: Yes, and he meant it seriously. A group of them took me then to see this man who'd just passed away. They told me he was a Russian nobleman who'd been living there... and they claimed he had a lot of jewels and valuables hidden away somewhere else.

FOSS: Was this really a fact?

GARD: Well, I couldn't say about that. I know when he died all he had was two dollars and a bottle of whiskey. They took up a collection to bury him. ...The people there really thought a lot of him.

FOSS: What an odd story.

GARD: (CHUCKLING) I'll tell you about a funny thing that happened in my office not long ago. An old fellow hurried in and told me I ought to get over to the hospital right away. I asked why, and he said an old timer he knew was having an operation that afternoon..!

FOSS: Did he think you ought to get his story before the operation?

GARD: That was the general idea.

FOSS: Mr. Gard, will amusing little incidents like this be included in the story you're building about Alberta?

GARD: Oh, yes. By folklore, we mean the whole life of Alberta folk, past and present. We're including comments on the weather and the land. The tales of the Indians and the waterways. And the stories about Alberta place names, and about the industries like mining, oil, and wheat.

FOSS: Well— that seems to include about everything.

GARD: Almost, I hope. You see, I'm trying to build up a picture of the people of Alberta and their background. I'd like to show how they lived in the past, and how they're living now... to tell about their good times, and their bad times, too.

FOSS: If you can do all that, Mr. Gard... I think you'll have explained what kind of people are in Alberta... and how they got that way.

GARD: The people here are really interesting. That was my first impression when I came to Banff eighteen months ago, and I haven't changed it.

FOSS: In what way, in particular, do you find them interesting?

GARD: Well, just now I was thinking of the farm women with their men folks all at war who came to the Banff School of Fine Arts to study for a week... with the idea of being able to fill a better place in their community life when they went back home again.

FOSS: Was that unusual?

GARD: No... it wasn't. It wasn't unusual either to hear about farmers with enough courage to watch the hail beat down their crops in the morning, and make ice cream out of the hailstones in the afternoon.

FOSS: I think that takes a strong sense of humor, too ... as well as courage. ....By the way, I suppose you've visited some of our big ranches,

haven't you?

GARD: Yes... The culture existing on some of them is what I'd call 'old world'. You know, I heard of one rancher— an Englishman— who'd often write a latin motto on the back of a restaurant check, and who might start quoting Virgil or Milton almost any time.

FOSS: When I think of my own scanty memory of Milton— let alone Virgil— I can hardly believe that! ....Now do you know— I still haven't asked you half the questions I had in mind.

GARD: Well, maybe we can still get around to a few of them.

FOSS: Could you perhaps describe just a few of the people and things and places you're collecting material about?

GARD: I'll try... Starting out with the people and things... I think the stories about the Ogopogo are pretty interesting.

FOSS: Is the Ogopogo a person or a thing?

GARD: (CHUCKLING) You don't mean you never heard of the Ogopogo!

FOSS: I don't think so.

GARD: Well, according to Indian legend, he's a monster who lives in the North Saskatchewan River near Rocky Mountain House. In Ontario and British Columbia, they have the Ogopogo, too, but I don't think he's supposed to be half as big or terrible as the North Saskatchewan one.

FOSS: You know, I believe I <u>do</u> remember reading about this monster in the papers.

GARD: I wouldn't be surprised. Stories about him pop up almost every year.

FOSS: If I remember right, he's like a giant sea serpent, isn't he? ....supposed to be large enough to swallow a calf whole?

GARD: That's the Ogopogo! ....and we've collected a lot of stories about him.

FOSS: Now the people... I suppose most of your stories are about them.

GARD: Yes, I'd say so. People supply the framework for most any story. ....A few minutes ago, we were talking about the big ranches and Englishmen... Some of the best stories I have are about 'remittance' men.

FOSS: If I'm not mistaken... weren't these 'remittance men' ne'er-do-wells who were sent out here from England? ...for England's good?

GARD: That's right.

FOSS: They were hardly the type who made a success of ranching, were they?

GARD: Well, some of them did ... but I guess a lot of them never did.

FOSS: Do you know why so many of them were sent to Alberta?

GARD: Mostly because... back around the turn of the century, Alberta was painted as ~~a rancher's paradise.~~ the Promised Land.

FOSS: So— they came with a stake of a few thousand pounds— planning to settle down ~~on a ranch.~~.. Was that the idea?

GARD: Yes-s.... A lot of them settled around the bars in High River and Calgary, ~~instead~~.

FOSS: I suppose even if they had good intentions, they were such greenhorns it wouldn't have been easy for them...

GARD: Yes— I can think of one story I heard about a 'remittance man' who set out to buy a homestead. He hadn't been used to buying the land and buildings in a lump sum——

FOSS: You mean, he thought the land and buildings had to be bought separately?

GARD: That's it. —He asked the homesteader how much he wanted for the land, and the homesteader said two thousand pounds. So, he paid that... and then asked the cost of the house.

FOSS: I'll bet the homesteader was surprised by that.

GARD: Well, he set a price on it anyway! And in the end, he had the poor 'remittance man' even buying the well separately!

FOSS: He must have been furious when he found out what a trick had been played on him!

GARD: I don't blame him if he was. —Some remittance men were more resourceful though. One of these who knew more about bars than ranches got a letter saying his father was coming out from England to inspect his ranch....

FOSS: And didn't he own a ranch...?

GARD: Not even a single cow. But he persuaded a friend with a few hundred head— and a ranch, too— to help him out.

FOSS: You mean...he pretended the place was his?

GARD: Yes— He and his friend had a great time chasing the cattle from one place to another to show the father how many thousands there were in the herds.

FOSS: And did the father never find out?

GARD: I guess not. In fact... he figured ~~he~~ his son was such a success he left him a few thousand more pounds to invest in cattle.

FOSS: After that, I imagine our friend was seen mostly in Calgary for awhile?

GARD: That's right., he was.

~~FOSS: I imagine you've collected even more stories about the old timers than you have about the remittance men, haven't you?~~

GARD: ~~Yes~~, I've collected a lot of material about old timers like Shorty McLaughlin of High River, Paddy Nolan of Calgary, and Bob Edwards, of Calgary, too.

FOSS: I've heard of all of them.

GARD: And up in the Peace River Country, I've collected stories about people like "Twelve Foot" Davis, and Ma Brainard the famous cook.

FOSS: Isn't there a town named after her?

GARD: Well, there's a post office. Ma comes originally from North Carolina

and she tells me as soon as I give her a package of black-eyed peas from Carolina, she'll give me the whole story of her experiences in the North. I think that ought to be quite a story.

FOSS: I think it should, myself.

GARD: Now, if you want to know what places I think are interesting... Well, I think you've got everything here.... the mystery of your rivers.... the freedom of your plains, and the grandeur of your mountains (they can't be rivalled anywhere this side of the Alps). You've got characters and scenes here that can't be duplicated anywhere else, and I only hope this work we're doing here makes Alberta people conscious and proud of all this fine background.

FOSS: I'm sure it will, Mr. Gard, and thanks so much for all you've told us this afternoon.